

FROM THE BOOKSHELF #138  
JOHN CLADES

APRIL 27, 1976

CHILDREN IN THE POLITICAL SYSTEM, BY DAVID EASTON AND  
JACK DENNIS

ANNCR: THE VOICE OF AMERICA BRINGS YOU ANOTHER IN THE WEEKLY SERIES FROM THE BOOKSHELF IN WHICH WE REPORT ON BOOKS AMERICANS ARE READING. TODAY, CHILDREN IN THE POLITICAL SYSTEM, BY DAVID EASTON AND JACK DENNIS, PUBLISHED BY MCGRAW-HILL. HERE IS BOOK EDITOR \_\_\_\_\_ WITH JOHN CLADES' REPORT.

EDITOR: A MAN IS DRIVING AROUND LOOKING DESPERATELY FOR A SPACE TO PARK HIS CAR. HIS THREE-AND-A-HALF-YEAR OLD SON POINTS TO AN EMPTY SPACE. THE FATHER TELLS HIM THAT THERE IS A "NO PARKING" SIGN, THAT IF THEY LEAVE THEIR CAR THERE THE POLICEMAN WILL GIVE THEM A TICKET.

WITH THIS SIMPLE EXAMPLE PROFESSORS DAVID EASTON AND JACK DENNIS, POLITICAL SCIENTISTS AT THE UNIVERSITIES OF CHICAGO AND OF WISCONSIN, OPEN THEIR STUDY OF HOW AMERICAN CHILDREN DEVELOP ATTITUDES TOWARD WHAT WE CALL "POLITICAL AUTHORITY". THE AUTHORS BELIEVE THAT AMERICAN CHILDREN'S POLITICAL EDUCATION STARTS AT THE MOMENT THEY BECOME EVEN VAGUELY AWARE THAT THERE IS A POWER BEYOND THE FAMILY TO WHICH EVEN THEIR "MIGHTY" FATHER HAS TO SUBMIT. THE "NO PARKING" SIGN IS A HOMELY EXAMPLE.

PROFESSORS EASTON AND DENNIS USE STATISTICAL ANALYSIS TO EXPLORE WHEN AND HOW THIS DEVELOPMENT OF AWARENESS OF AUTHORITY OCCURS, TO DETERMINE HOW AMERICAN CHILDREN COME IN CONTACT WITH POLITICAL AUTHORITY, HOW THEIR

EDITOR: ATTITUDES DEVELOP THROUGH THE YEARS, AND HOW THEIR FIRST  
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IMAGES OF POLITICAL AUTHORITY INFLUENCE THEIR ATTITUDES  
AS ADULTS.

O THE TWO PROFESSORS SAY THAT THE PROBLEMS THEY FACED WHEN  
THEY DECIDED TO GO AHEAD WITH THEIR STUDY, WERE NOT  
SIMPLE. THEY NOTE:

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T VOICE: "ESSENTIALLY THERE WAS NO FIRM EVIDENCE CONCERNING WHEN  
NEW MEMBERS OF A POLITICAL SOCIETY TYPICALLY LEARN THEIR  
BASIC LESSONS. WHAT LITTLE EMPIRICAL DATA HAD COME TO  
LIGHT SEEMED TO ASSUME THAT ADOLESCENCE OR EARLY ADULTHOOD  
IS POLITICALLY THE MOST FORMATIVE PERIOD."

EDITOR: EASTON AND DENNIS TESTED THE TRADITIONAL ASSUMPTION THAT  
AWARENESS BEGINS IN SECONDARY SCHOOL WITH A PILOT STUDY OF  
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN THE CHICAGO AREA. THE RESULTS  
CONVINCED THEM THAT THEY WERE RIGHT IN THEIR BELIEF THAT  
CHILDREN OF HIGH SCHOOL AGE HAVE LONG SINCE FORMED  
DEFINITE IDEAS ABOUT THE POLITICAL SYSTEM.

SO, THEY DECIDED TO GO AHEAD AND PROVE THEIR POINT OF  
EARLIER AWARENESS. WHY IS THIS OF ANY CONSEQUENCE? THEY  
ARGUE THAT POINT THIS WAY:

VOICE: "EVERY POLITICAL SYSTEM, FROM THE MOST DEMOCRATIC TO THE  
MOST AUTHORITARIAN, TRIES TO EVOKE A MINIMUM POSITIVE  
SUPPORT. SUPPORT FOR THE SYSTEM CAN LEAD BOTH TO ITS  
MAINTENANCE AND TO ITS ORDERLY TRANSFORMATION THROUGH  
ESTABLISHED AND ACCEPTED PROCEDURES, WHILE HOSTILITY  
COULD LEAD TO THE BREAKDOWN OF THE SYSTEM ITSELF. SINCE

VOICE: TODAY'S CHILDREN ARE TOMORROW'S ADULTS, WHO WILL FURNISH  
(CONT'D)

BOTH POLITICAL LEADERS AND FOLLOWERS, THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING HOW POLITICAL ATTITUDES ARE FORMED CANNOT BE OVERESTIMATED."

EDITOR: PROFESSORS EASTON AND DENNIS BASED THEIR STUDY ON AN ANALYSIS OF DATA COLLECTED FROM OVER 12,000 QUESTIONNAIRES FILLED OUT BY WHITE URBAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN IN GRADES TWO TO EIGHT ACROSS THE UNITED STATES.

THE QUESTIONNAIRES WERE VERY SIMPLE. FOR EXAMPLE, A SET OF ELEVEN CARDS WERE PRESENTED TO THE CHILDREN. THE CARDS CARRIED PICTURES OF DIFFERENT AUTHORITY FIGURES: THE PRESIDENT, THE GOVERNOR OF THEIR STATE, THE MAYOR OF THEIR CITY, A STATE SENATOR, A POLICEMAN, SOLDIER, A FATHER AND SO ON. THE CHILDREN WERE ASKED TO ANSWER QUESTIONS LIKE: "WHICH PERSON DO YOU KNOW THE MOST ABOUT?...OR "WHO HELPS YOUR FAMILY MOST?" AND SO ON. OLDER CHILDREN WERE ASKED TO SAY WHAT THEY THOUGHT A PRESIDENT DOES, WHAT THEY KNEW ABOUT THE SUPREME COURT, ETCETERA.

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PROFESSORS EASTON AND DENNIS SEE FOUR BASIC PROCESSES WHICH CHARACTERIZE THE WAY AMERICAN SCHOOL CHILDREN BECOME AWARE OF THE STRUCTURE OF POLITICAL AUTHORITY AND DEVELOP POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE FEELINGS TOWARDS IT. AT A VERY EARLY AGE, CHILDREN LEARN TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN FAMILY AUTHORITY AND A POWER EXTERNAL TO AND SUPERIOR TO THE FAMILY. LATER THEY BECOME AWARE OF POLITICAL AUTHORITY THROUGH THEIR CONTACTS WITH INDIVIDUALS WHO PERSONALIZE AUTHORITY. FIGURES RANGING

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EDITOR: FROM POLICEMEN TO THE PRESIDENT THEY SEE ON TELEVISION.  
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IDEALIZING AUTHORITY ALSO OCCURS EARLY IN LIFE BUT WEARS OFF AS CHILDREN PROGRESS THROUGH THE ELEMENTARY GRADES. BUT AT THE AGE OF 9 OR 10 THE MATURING CHILD, DURING THE LAST YEARS OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, DOES GIVE POSITIVE SUPPORT TO THE MORE IMPERSONAL ELEMENTS OF AUTHORITY LIKE THE CONGRESS OR THE SUPREME COURT.

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PROFESSORS EASTON AND DENNIS CONCLUDE THAT BY THE TIME AMERICAN CHILDREN LEAVE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, THEY HAVE ASSEMBLED A FORMIDABLE ARRAY OF BASIC POLITICAL ORIENTATIONS.

FOR EXAMPLE, THE LEVEL OF AN ADULTS'S SUPPORT FOR, OR HOSTILITY TOWARD POLITICAL AUTHORITY, IS DETERMINED IN PART BY THE ATTITUDES HE DEVELOPS AS A CHILD.

ALSO, THE CHILD'S RATINGS OF POLITICAL AUTHORITIES ARE INFLUENCED IN PART BY COMPARING THOSE AUTHORITY FIGURES WITH HIS FATHER.

AND LAST, BUT MOST IMPORTANT, THE PROFESSORS SAY:

VOICE: "THERE IS AN ALMOST MONOLITHIC BASE OF GENERALIZED SUPPORT AMONG YOUNGSTERS FOR THE STRUCTURE OF POLITICAL AUTHORITY IN THE AMERICAN POLITICAL SYSTEM...THAT THIS SUPPORT WAS FOUND IN ALL THE SUBGROUPS OF CHILDREN POLLED."

EDITOR: THE AUTHORS DO NOT SAY THEIR THEORIES CAN BE AUTOMATICALLY APPLIED TO OTHER SOCIETIES. THAT WOULD REQUIRE--THEY SAY-- RESEARCH TAILORED TO THE PARTICULAR SOCIETY BEING EXAMINED.

ANNCR: YOU HAVE BEEN LISTENING TO A REVIEW OF CHILDREN IN THE  
POLITICAL SYSTEM BY PROFESSORS DAVID EASTON AND JACK DENNIS,  
POLITICAL SCIENTISTS AT THE UNIVERSITIES OF CHICAGO AND  
WISCONSIN. WE INVITE YOU TO JOIN US NEXT WEEK, (AT THIS  
TIME) WHEN THE VOICE OF AMERICA WILL BRING YOU ANOTHER  
REVIEW OF THE MANY BOOKS AMERICANS ARE CHOOSING...FROM THE  
BOOKSHELF. THIS IS \_\_\_\_\_.

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